

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Completely Shelfless: reinventing a physical library for an online community

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Stiles, Keren and Killick, Selena (2019). Completely Shelfless: reinventing a physical library for an online community. In: 5th annual international User Experience in Libraries conference (UXLibsV), 18-19 Jun 2019, Royal Holloway, University of London.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2019 The Open University Library Services



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Completely Shelfless: reinventing a physical library for an online community

Keren Stiles, @KerenSti
Selena Killick, @SelenaKillick

@OU_Library

- 173,000+
- 180 & 600
- 87%
- 78
- 70% & 100%
- 24/7
- 3

The Open University turned 50 in 2019

It is the UK's largest University with over 173,000 students and over 24,000 of those students have a registered disability

We teach a range of qualifications, 180 at the last count, which are made up of 600 modules

87% of those modules have embedded Digital & Information Literacy Skills & Library content

The Library team consists of 78 colleagues

Our students are distance learners so our primary delivery method of content to our students is online, with 70% of our book and 100% of our journals available electronically.

Library user are supported by 24/7 webchat

The library has won 3 awards this year – two OU Teaching Awards, for our Live Engagement team and our work with our student panel, and the information literacy award at LILAC.

Being primarily an online library for distance learners, our policy tends to focus on student success and student satisfaction.

From around 2007, as budgets were squeezed due to changes in student loans for part-time learners, the global recession and subsequent fee changes, we reduced the services in the building to focus our resources on developing and maintaining the online library.

173,000+

180 & 600

87%

78

70% & 100%

24/7

3

Library needs research – phase 1

In June 2018 research was carried out with all stakeholder groups to uncover library needs that might not have been identified by previous UX research.

Most of our previous research had been only with taught students, none of whom are on campus, so we wanted to include the whole community.

There are around 4000 staff and over 800 postgraduate research students on the campus in Milton Keynes, as well as staff who are based elsewhere and visit campus from time to time.

Methods used in the Library needs project included:

- Building audits to identify occupancy
- Exit surveys to identify which groups of stakeholders were using the building
- Interviews with individuals from different stakeholder groups

Participants spoke about the value of the Library in their work, research, and study.

In line with our continual improvement culture, however, one area was singled out as in need of improvement: the physical library.

However, the Library needs work demonstrated that this had led to a loss of relationship capital with key stakeholders on campus.

The library's management team used the findings of the Library needs project to develop a vision for the building.

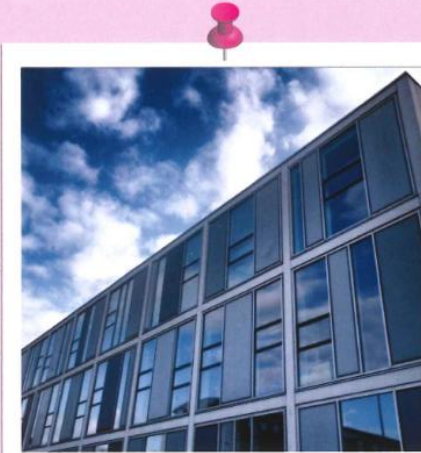


Library building research – phase 2

Dear Library building,

I like to use the Library building because.....

Very quiet!!
lots of newspapers
and comfy chairs.



Library Building

Dear OU Library,

I don't use the Library building because.....

It is not welcoming
and there are no staff
to help me find what
I am looking for.



Several instances on different floors of people trying to collaborate in inappropriate space: either too small, single desk or in a quiet area

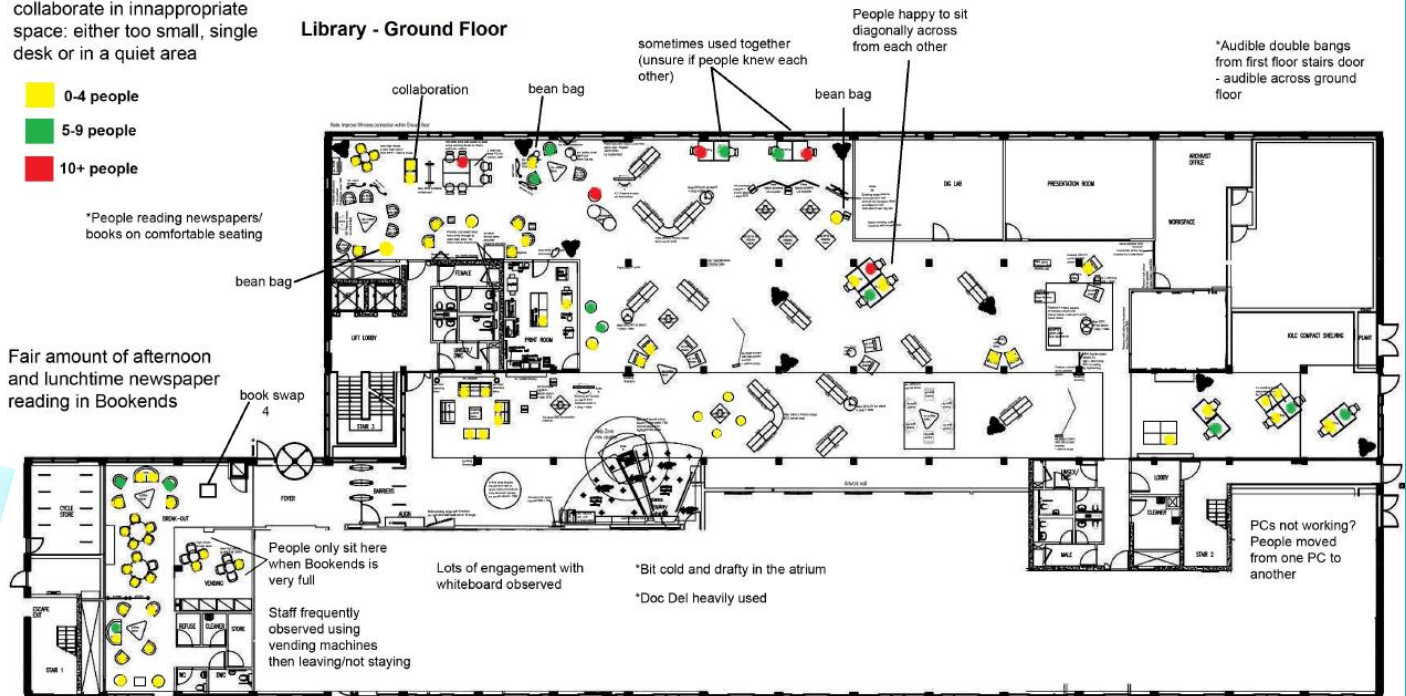
* Most people using PCs also had laptops with them

Library - Ground Floor

- 0-4 people
- 5-9 people
- 10+ people

*People reading newspapers/ books on comfortable seating

Fair amount of afternoon and lunchtime newspaper reading in Bookends



To follow up on how to improve the physical library to meet the needs of our community we carried out further UX research in October.

Methods included:

- Observations & head counts in the building to see how spaces are used
- Love / Breakup postcards from outside the library building – feedback boxes were set up in catering spaces
- Guerrilla interviews – why don't you use the library building? We conducted 5 minute interviews with passers-by on paths away from the library building
- Online survey using the same questions as the interviews sent to senior stakeholders and staff based away from the campus
- Literature search – knowing that others had already published findings about needs in physical library spaces



Feelings about the building

"a quiet space if I need to work on something alone"

"The library is not a very welcoming space due to the lack of staff"

"it's light, airy and quiet"

"you don't really want us in there. It hurts."

"I do not use the spaces for students, they are for students!"

Services

"Don't want to pick up a phone."

"there are no staff to help me find what I am looking for"

"The library staff and services are exceptional – ILL, ORO, etc."

Future needs

"Be good to have hot desks which we could use, with computers."

For those rarely on campus, lockable storage spaces.

"space where colleagues can gather to share research skills or interests"

"meeting places for informal meetings"

"I think it would be good to have a large exhibition space"

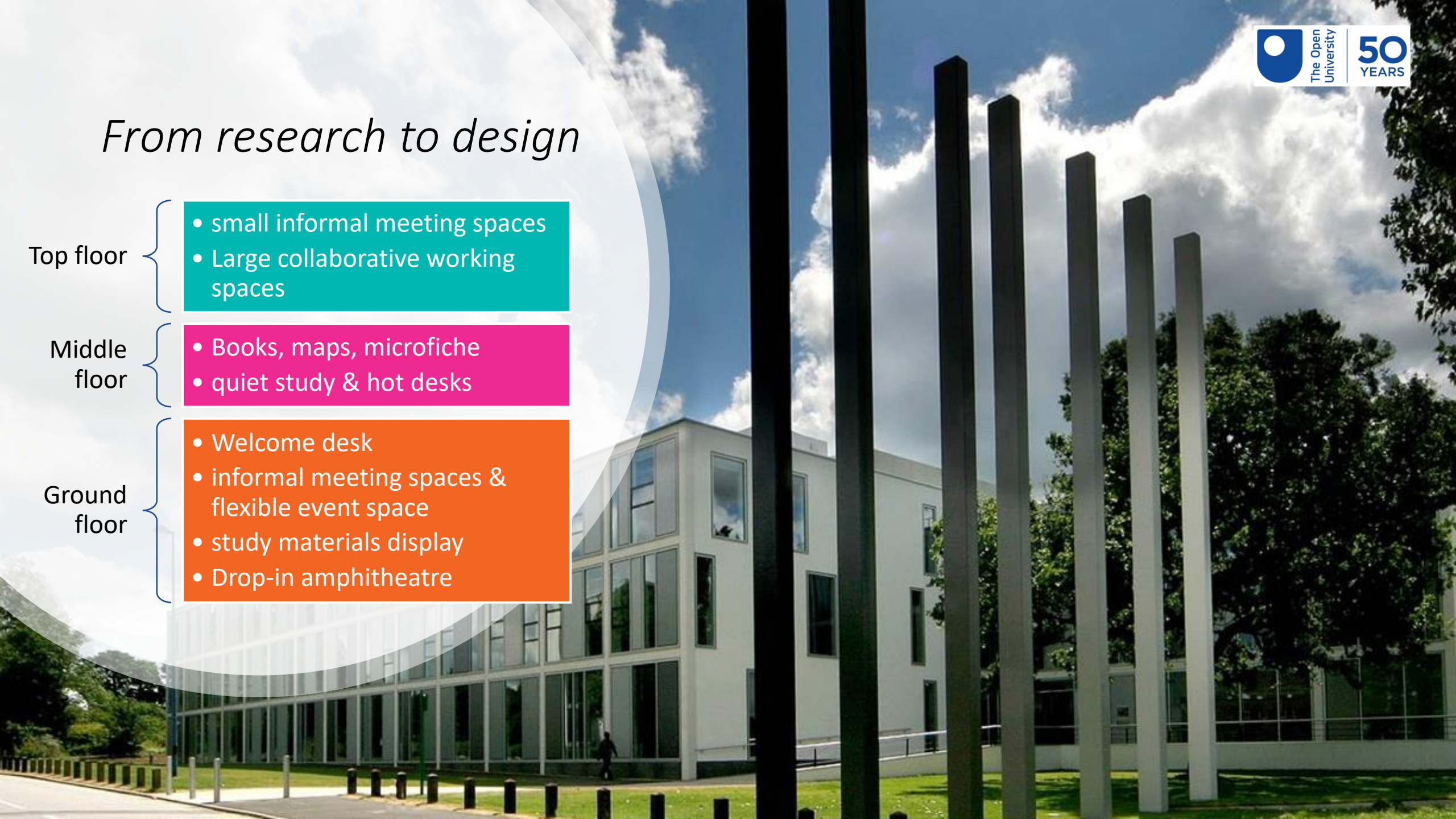
The building feels unwelcoming, but the quiet, calm space is highly valued. One postgraduate student told us she felt that we didn't want people in the library.

A lot of people told us they would really like to see staff on the ground floor, and that this might help to make them feel more welcome.

People want exhibition space, somewhere to showcase research outputs and teaching materials, hot desks and informal meeting spaces, spaces where they can Skype without disturbing anyone, and attractive filming spaces where they're not disturbing other staff.

The library's management team were presented with the findings from the research and used them to develop the vision for the building further, and have been working with the university's Estates department on how to realise that vision.

From research to design



At this point, I'd like to be telling you about the techniques that were used to transform the user needs we identified into a design for the building, but the reality is that mostly one person drafted a vision for the rest of the managers to discuss. That vision has been adapted as new user data came in, and as political pressures changed.

Based on what users told us, it became apparent that we need to zone the spaces in the building. We need to continue to provide calm and quiet study space, but also provide the other types of spaces requested.

Luckily, the building has three floors, two of which are closed off from the central atrium, so the layout allows us to readily separate quiet spaces from noisier spaces.

The ground floor will become a flexible space which can be used for large events, but also used for informal meeting spaces when not set up for an event.

The challenge around this is that the library staff office area is open to the central atrium on one side, so noise from events on the ground floor affects our work environment. This noise impact will need to be managed, and communications to library staff about the changes to the building need to be pitched right so that we acknowledge and address their concerns.

The first floor will remain the quiet study space, but with the addition of some armchairs, more desks near windows, and a mix of PCs and empty desks.

The second floor is already not an entirely quiet space because it's a thoroughfare through to meeting rooms, but it will also be updated to provide collaborative creative spaces for large groups, as well as pods that individuals can use for calls and online meetings.

Coming soon



Coming
soon

The first phase of this includes making the ground floor area much more flexible, so that it can be used for exhibitions and knowledge sharing events, but can also be used as informal meeting space and collaborative space between events.

To enable this

- all fixed shelving units will be removed and stock will be condensed onto the wheeled shelving units we already have;
- existing furniture will be replaced with furniture that is easier to move, also on wheels as much as possible
- New furniture will be modular and high sided so that conversations can be heard over other noises in the space and don't disturb others in the space
- Replacing rolling stacks with a small amphitheatre for TED-style talks to enable knowledge exchange



We haven't been able to make the changes all in one go, so the changes to the building will progress gradually, as funding becomes available and when Estates can fit us in to their planned work. We don't yet know when we will make changes to the second floor, or how we will fund it, and we haven't been able to order a new welcome desk this year.

We hope to emulate other libraries who've done this kind of work by setting up test versions of the types of spaces we want to provide and giving users the opportunity to feedback on whether those spaces met the intended need. We aren't sure if this will go ahead because our Estates department are accustomed to running 6 week projects which are carefully scheduled into their workload planning.



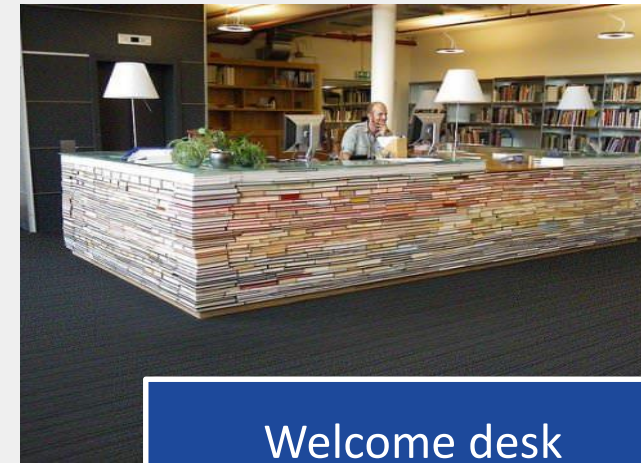
Spaces for small private meetings



Large collaborative working spaces



Spaces for online meetings



Welcome desk

THANK YOU

Keren.Stiles@open.ac.uk

@KerenSti

Selena.Killick@open.ac.uk

@SelenaKillick

Library-Services@open.ac.uk

@OU_Library



The Open
University

50
YEARS



50.open.ac.uk